**ICHS Blog:**

Since my appointment as the National Library of Ireland Research Student in October 2016, my principal task has been cataloguing the De Freyne Papers. Beginning in 1625, the papers of the French family of Frenchpark in County Roscommon provide insight into the turbulence caused by plantation and Restoration in seventeenth century Ireland. The De Freyne Papers have provided this early modernist with plenty to digest, but they have also allowed me to engage with later periods of Irish history, with specific events and with remarkable individuals. A significant proportion of the collection chronicles the ‘long’ Land War, which played out across rural Ireland in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The incumbency of Arthur French, 4th Baron De Freyne of Coolavin, was a troubled one, marred by increasing debt, diminishing returns and ongoing tenant unrest. Conditions on the De Freyne estate were reported as dire and a number of ejectment notices and caretaker agreements in the collection point to a steep decline in relations between landlord and tenants.

As well as providing insight into some of the major social and political developments in Irish history, the De Freyne Papers offer evidence of compelling personal histories. The mid-eighteenth-century letters from John French of High Lake and Carrowduff to his uncle, The Rev. William French, and his cousin Charles, tell a tale of debt and desolation in London. Letters from Arthur Reginald (‘Reggie’), 5th Baron De Freyne, to his father, recount his experiences in the Philippines in the early twentieth century, when he served in the US Army. Familial consternation over Reggie’s marriage to Annabelle Angus, the daughter of a Scottish domestic servant and innkeeper, is in evidence too. A copy of Annabelle’s birth certificate is accompanied by a letter to Reggie’s stepmother, Lady Marie Georgiana De Freyne, from solicitor Thomas Rowe, discussing the possibility that the Scotswoman was married to another British officer.

It might be argued that the jewel in the De Freyne Papers comes not from the hand of a French, however, but from that of ‘The Liberator’, Daniel O’Connell. Dated September 1828, two substantial letters from O’Connell to the English philosopher, jurist and social reformer, Jeremy Bentham, discuss the campaign for Catholic Emancipation, among other matters. For me, this exemplifies the most enriching part of the Research Studentship: the opportunity to arrange and catalogue a collection brings you into contact with primary source material in a completely different way. There is something intoxicating in the knowledge that very few others have looked at or held the items in front of you and there is great satisfaction in the knowledge that you play a role in making important material available to the public.

The management and staff in the Library’s Special Collections have beenincredibly supportive and I have felt like a part of the team since day one. In the role of Archivist on Duty, I have been tasked with managing orders for the Manuscript Reading Room and addressing reader queries by phone and email. This has been enormously instructive, as it requires me to dig into the National Library’s collections and catalogues and to look at material that might otherwise have escaped my notice. One of the greatest resources available to the Archivist on Duty is the Library’s staff and I have frequently benefitted from their knowledge, skills and insight.

In addition to the responsibilities of Archivist on Duty, my role in providing tours of the Manuscript Reading Room to third-level groups has furthered my knowledge of the Library, its collections and resources, its conservation strategy and its commitment to public engagement. Tours are tailored to meet students’ research interests and I have been charged with identifying suitable primary items to showcase in the Reading Room. Having access to such a wealth of primary sources feels like being a kid in a sweet shop; the store shelves are lined with box after box of material, home to over a thousand years of Irish history. I have really enjoyed playing a part in the education and outreach programme and feel that this aspect of the Studentship has allowed me to contextualise the importance of the National Library of Ireland in Ireland’s cultural landscape.

At present, I am halfway through my year as the National Library’s Research Student and I would like to emphasise how positive the whole experience has been for me. It is a singular opportunity to gain a completely different perspective on Special Collections, to identify new avenues of research, to acquire a new skill set, and to spend time with a dedicated and very lovely bunch of people.